

# LAST SEEN

SNEAK PEEK

J.T. ELLISON

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**From New York Times bestselling author J.T. Ellison comes a twisted psychological thriller about the bonds of family and the disconnect between memory and the truth.**

*Come here. Come closer.*

Halley James knows her marriage is over. But she's not prepared for the rest of her life to fall apart too.

*No one can hear you. No one can help you.*

She just lost her job at the forensics lab. Her dad needs emergency surgery. But the biggest blow comes back home in Marchburg, Virginia, where she discovers her mother didn't actually die in a car crash. Her mom was murdered—and her father lied about it all these years.

*I have nothing to hide from you. Are you hiding something from me?*



# PRAISE FOR LAST SEEN

“My favorite kind of thriller—dark family secrets, high-stakes mystery, and a shocked daughter who will stop at nothing to determine the truth. Wherever J.T. Ellison goes, I want to follow.”

—**Lisa Gardner, New York Times bestselling author of *Kiss Her Goodbye***

“In *Last Seen*, J.T. Ellison weaves a gripping tale of family secrets, broken trust, and the slippery nature of memory. When Halley James learns her mother was murdered—not killed in an accident—her search for the truth leads to a deceptively perfect town hiding dark secrets. With twists that keep you guessing, this masterfully crafted thriller showcases Ellison at the top of her game.”

—**Liv Constantine, New York Times bestselling author of *The Last Mrs. Parrish***

“Darkly original and bursting with hold-your-breath suspense, *LAST SEEN* by J.T. Ellison is a haunting deep dive into a harrowing crime, buried memories, and one woman’s obses-

sion to discover the truth no matter the consequences. At the top of her game, Ellison's expert storytelling is on full display—LAST SEEN is a must-read for thriller fans.”

—**Heather Gudenkauf, New York Times bestselling author of *The Overnight Guest* and *The Perfect Hosts***

“If someone lies about the things that matter most to you, it's your right, isn't it, to go after the truth? So bravo to fearless forensic scientist Halley James for daring to peel away the layers of deceit in this dark, twisty, and gripping thriller that grabs you, pulls you in, and keeps you guessing until you reach the final page with your heart pounding in your chest.”

—**Kate White, New York Times bestselling author of *The Last Time She Saw Him***

# PROLOGUE

I have never run so fast before.

The woods are thick and impenetrable to the eye, and I stumble through, desperate for a hint of light. Trees reach out with long branches to impede my path. Rocks shift and make me skid. Bushes appear from nowhere, sharp things scratching me open. More than once, my ankle turns, sending searing pain through my body. But I cannot stop. If I stop, I will be dead. Maybe here, under the sky and moon. Maybe there, in the vast darkness.

I have to get away. This is my only chance.

I'm panting, but I must be quiet, breathe through my nose, and pray he can't hear me crashing through the trees. I have a head start, only just, but his footsteps come anyway, their rhythm a corrupt heartbeat. I veer off to the right, then to the left, following no discernible path, trying to throw him off. He is hunting me, I know he is, back there with that look on his face—the twist of his lips, the shine in his dark eyes, the perverse joy in being the cause of my fear.

The trees open into a meadow, and now I can pour on the speed, but my lungs are about to burst. I trip, fall, rolling.

Scramble back up. My palms sting; wetness and gravel. I can smell the blood, and other, darker things.

In the deep of night, without much moon glow, the field is not easy to traverse. I stumble again, and again, skin knees, shins, shoulders, but there is darkness at the end of the meadow. A cleaner view. Not light, but infinity. The cliff is ahead. If I can make the cliff . . . then what?

A choice.

I check the bandage wrapped around my chest. It is warm and wet. Blood still seeps from the deep cut. He likes to watch me bleed. Can he follow my path by the scent alone? Am I simply a wounded deer, dragging itself to its inexorable end? He will find me. He will take me back to that hell . . . Panic flows through me anew, and I start off again but can feel the weakness in my legs. My lungs hurt; my body is fighting me. It was not meant to run this far, this fast. But I stay upright, push on, because not to is worse. A fate worse than death, isn't that what they say? If he catches me . . . I don't want to think about that. I don't know how long he's had me captive. Weeks, certainly. Perhaps months? The gentle swell of my belly should tell time better than any watch, but without a calendar, without scans and blood tests, there's no way to know for sure. Long enough to mark me, inside and out. Too long.

The darkness expands, and I realize I'm closing in on the cliffside.

To my left, round twin lights appear, bobbing in the darkness. A car. A car is coming. That means there is a road. There is another escape. I turn and run toward freedom, forgetting all the pains, all the fatigue. There is nothing in me now but hope. A car means a road means a town means help.

The hand on my arm appears from nowhere, yanking me to a halt, almost pulling my shoulder from the socket.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asks, dark amuse-

ment in his tone. He isn't even out of breath. As if he's flown here on dark wings, like the demon he is.

Hope vanishes with his closed fist against my jaw. Pain explodes, and I fall to the ground. I try to cry out, but nothing comes. My mouth won't work. Won't open. He covers me with his body, his hand tight against my throat. His weight, his horrible weight, pushing me down to the dirt, hiding me in the long grass.

The car whizzes by, and with it, my last chance.

The woods are silent and hungry, waiting, listening. There is nothing now except the panting of my breath and the singing joy of his black heart. I can hear it pounding above my ear. That, and other things. Arousal, to start. As if he's enjoying this. Of course he is. He's won.

He pulls me to my feet and starts the long, slow march back. I don't help, make him drag me. The pain in my face makes tears flow down my cheeks. I think my jaw is broken and I know my tongue is cut; I'm gurgling blood. I spit and dribble and stay limp until he jerks me upright and in a low, menacing voice explains to me in detail exactly what he's going to do if I don't cooperate. By the third sentence of description, I've found my feet and stiffened my spine.

It's not about what he'll do to me. It's what he'll do to them.



# ONE

HALLEY

2017

WASHINGTON, DC

“YOU’RE FIRED.”

Halley James crosses M Street on her way home from her office in Foggy Bottom, heart pounding. She is in shock. Two words, and her entire world has blown apart.

It is midmorning on a sunny Monday, and the streets are calm. Everyone is already at work, or at school, or in the shops. The lunch rush hasn’t started. The few cars behave, not beeping and cursing and rushing. She is alone, marching up the hill, the two words from her boss’s mouth replaying with every step.

*You’re fired you’re fired you’re fired.*

She’d taken special care with her appearance today. Her good-luck suit, her dark, unruly hair wound into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Her mother’s pearls.

A fresh start. A well-earned, long-overdue promotion. And instead, a dead end.

She's not crying, not yet. No doubt the tears are lodged inside, still trying to figure out what the hell just happened. She isn't much of a crier anyway; she is a scientist, too cool and logical to waste time with tears. But she can feel them threatening. They come when she is frustrated, and today qualifies.

She stops at the light on Wisconsin Avenue. Her hands are shaking.

The left looks so strange without her wedding rings. She took them off before her shower this morning and didn't put them back on. The sorrow of that nearly overwhelmed her. But she knows she needs to get accustomed to not seeing the flash of diamonds and platinum, losing the acceptance of others when they immediately know her status as a married woman. Of course, she's spent years as a married woman, and nothing else. A decade of waiting, of trying to be a good wife, of trying to take the next logical step with a man who she found out too late does not want what she does from their life together.

Ten years down the drain. All that's left is two signatures on a long piece of blue-backed paper to officially separate her from him, to divest their lives. So ironic; the very day she was supposed to be starting over, launching her new life as a single woman, this happens.

She hasn't decided when she's going to tell everyone. Well, she'll have to share her new address with Human Resources, obviously, so they can update her file for the official termination package. But her dad, her friends, Theo's family . . . She made this decision to walk away from her marriage, and telling people they've decided to go their separate ways makes it seem too real.

And now, the double whammy. Can she go through the formalities of ending things with Theo if she doesn't have a job?

She doesn't have a job.

She's still trying to wrap her head around the one-eighty that just happened. Today was meant to be celebratory. Moving up to lab director was a decade-long ambition. Everyone knew she was about to get the gig. Her boss had been hinting at the bump up for weeks. She'd been counting on the extra money to get her through the separation and divorce. She scored the furnished basement apartment of her friends' town house in Georgetown and was going to propose a short-term lease so she could have a safe place to live while she gets on her feet. It's dark, and it's small, but it is well appointed and, more importantly, missing her husband. She officially left three weeks ago, leaving him with the house in McLean, their dog, Charlie, the art they've collected on various vacations, and the extra room she's been trying to convince him for the past five years would be a great nursery.

She needs this money to house herself, feed herself, start over.

And now . . . a terrifying reversal of fortune.

The light turns green. Yellow. Red again. She is frozen on this corner, unable to move forward, and finding it impossible to go backward.

She ducks into the coffee shop to her left instead. Sits at a blond oak table. Retraces the morning, the week, the month, looking for a word, a sign, that she was about to be blindsided. She can find nothing.

This morning, high on the knowledge she was about to get the promotion she'd been expecting, she'd taken off her rings, determined to become this new person, to open this new chapter. She'd entered the building, swiped her pass, and made her way to the lab, just like always. The sameness of her days is appealing. She loves the lab. Loves her work.

Her admin, Barbara, waved at her. "Ivan is looking for you."

Ivan Howland, her boss, the founder and CEO of their company, the National Investigative Sciences Laboratory, the NISL. Nothing unusual there.

“We have a meeting at ten. He wants me now instead? Why?”

Barbara shrugged. “I don’t know, Halley. He’s in his office.”

So she’d walked the hallway, her block-heeled pumps clacking on the marble. Knocked on his door, like she had a hundred times before. Put on a huge grin.

“Morning!”

He’d looked up—was that fear in his eyes?—and waved her in. “Close the door.”

She had. Sat in the leather-and-chrome chair across from his desk. Raised a brow. When he didn’t speak, she finally asked, “Everything okay?”

Ivan heaved a huge sigh. “Halley, there’s no good way to say this. The investigation into the ransomware attack last month has concluded. Though we’ve determined this was not a state-sponsored action, simply an international group out to ransom the data, the link that allowed the hackers into the system came from your computer. I’m afraid I have to let you go.”

“Excuse me?”

“The board insists. There has to be a head to roll, and you . . . Well, I hate this, I really do. But it’s out of my hands. You’re fired.”

“Ivan. Surely you’re joking.”

“I wish I was. You’re being let go with cause, too, because the board feels this action was in violation of your contract, so unfortunately there will be no severance. HR will be in touch with all the information you need so you can apply for unemployment and COBRA for your insurance. But I’m afraid I have to take your pass, your keys to the lab, any physical notes you’ve

taken on the current work, and you need to leave the premises. Now.”

Her entire life unraveling because she clicked on a link in an email? Impossible. This wasn't happening. Recognition dawned. This was an excuse. It wasn't just that phishing email, was it? Last year, she'd reported one of the lab managers for unceasing sexual harassment. Of her, yes, but of the younger women in the lab, too. He'd been the son of one of the board members, thought he could get away with it, that he was untouchable.

“This is retaliation for Kirk Agrant, isn't it.”

“Now, Halley. That's long in the past.” She noticed he didn't say it wasn't.

“I built this lab with you, Ivan. You're just going to let them throw me out on my ear because of a technicality?”

He took off his glasses and cleaned them. When had he aged so much? He was only twenty years her senior, but today he looked haggard. His beard was streaked with white, his hair thinning. Maybe he was sick. He had the gray pallor of the unwell. Of a man with a destiny curbed by ten men and women in ancillary industries who were pressuring him to take the company public. Halley had been against that, too. Firing her cleared the paths for everyone's goals, no doubt.

He jammed his glasses back on. “It's a bit more than a technicality, Halley. It cost the lab millions to ransom the data they stole and ruined the integrity of multiple cases. We're open to lawsuits now, and the board . . . They need a scalp, and I'm sorry to say they decided on yours. It was a unanimous vote. I hope you understand. I really have no choice here.”

A barista comes over. Halley doesn't know this one; she's all of eighteen and fresh as a thorny rose, with her septum piercing and sleeve of tattoos. “Can I get you something?”

“Oh. No. I was just . . .”

“If you’re not buying something, I’m afraid you need to leave.”

“Right. Of course.”

She wanders up Wisconsin, turns left on P Street, crosses Thirty-Third. Her friends’ town house is four stories and redbrick Federalist swank, like everything in this neighborhood. What was this morning’s elegant freedom is now a bleak set of mossy steps to a basement. Small. Lonely. And completely unaffordable. She can rely on her friends’ generosity for a few more days, maybe, but then? Every step she’s made in the past few weeks was in anticipation of getting promoted and landing a raise, not losing everything.

It hits her again, hard, and she sags against the door. She is going to have to let this dream go. She has to swallow her pride, move back home with Theo, and try to start again.

She collapses on the sofa. She can’t keep on like this anymore. She is being tested. Normally, if there is anything she loves in this life, it’s tests. She was always the weird kid who couldn’t wait to sit for an exam. It didn’t matter if it was a pop quiz in biology or the SATs or the last final for her graduate degree in forensic science or, now, as an adult, the annual boards she takes to keep her license active. Her heart races in anticipation; she sharpens her pencils; the paper appears on her desk—now the link to the test file on the computer—and off she goes. If there are real superpowers, test taking is hers.

This one? She’s failing miserably.

She enters the apartment, drops her bag on the floor, sinks onto the sofa, head in her hands. She yanks out the clip, and the dark mass flows over her shoulders.

Okay. Think.

Before she joined NISL, at Ivan Howland’s relentless behest, thank you very much, she’d had offers from the FBI, the CIA, Homeland Security, and ATF, mostly thanks to her grad school

professors singling her out and putting her on the radar of the organizations so she could do internships with each. She also had an offer to go home to her local police department. Lord knows they were always understaffed and needed as much help as they could get. There was something slightly romantic about the idea, helping police the community she grew up in. Very Mayberry.

But that was ten years ago. When she was twenty-four, she had the arrogance of youth on her side. She had a mission. She would solve crimes with science and might even become famous for it.

Ivan Howland had pounced on her at an American Academy of Forensic Sciences cocktail party just as she was making the decision about where to start her career, pitching a new lab program that he'd just gotten funding for. There was a lot more money in the private sector. They would be the most sophisticated lab in the country, the place where complicated cases would be solved. Cases local law enforcement couldn't afford to solve themselves. They had the funding to stay in front of the caseload, enough to staff a state-of-the-art lab and provide backup to the alphabet agencies.

She jumped at the chance. The freedom of the offer, not to mention the money included, was enticing. And ten years later, as she is about to hit the pinnacle of his promises, a pinnacle he wouldn't have reached without her, he cuts her loose without a second thought.

She supposes there are plenty of cheaper scientists out there now. And plenty more specializing in forensics than when she came out of school. People who won't complain when someone decides to play grab-ass with the interns. Someone who's not stupid enough to click on a link in a phishing email labeled as an internal meeting invite that even the FBI agent who'd investigated said was impeccable.

She has contacts. She has people she can reach out to. Several of the ones she turned down said if she ever changed her mind, to call immediately. She will make a list. Hopefully one or two still have their positions.

And of course, let's not forget the reason she is in a basement apartment in a Georgetown town house instead of driving home to her spacious four-bedroom home in McLean. The six-two, black-haired, blue-eyed ATF agent named Theodore Donovan. Her husband. Her soon-to-be ex-husband.

She loves Theo. She really does. And he loves her. But not quite enough. They've had normal issues over their decade of marriage, but it's been getting harder and harder to be the happy-go-lucky, band-loving, bar-hopping, museum-attending couple they used to be. Their conversations, always so broad-ranging in the beginning, became smaller, more focused. More entrenched. The fights are now singular. Repetitive.

She wants a family. He doesn't.

He claims it's because of his job, that it's too dangerous, that he'd rather not have a child at all than orphan one, but she knows he's just stalling because the idea of a kid terrifies him. She always thought they wanted the same thing. Then, when he said he didn't want kids, she thought she could change his mind. She was wrong. They've been fighting about it for five years, and now their love is permanently damaged.

Halley is the one who suggested the separation, and he agreed so quickly she knew it was over between them. He didn't fuss, didn't cry or moan, just sighed heavily and said, "You know I will always be here for you." Made her feel worse, but she thinks he's relieved. No more wife glaring at him over dinner, pressuring him to pony up that genetically gorgeous sperm and give her babies.

But now? What is she going to do? The paperwork has been drawn up. They're supposed to meet this evening after work to

sign everything. She'll have to get in touch with the lawyers and ask them to hold off. And tell Theo. Will he take her back? Probably. But only if she gives up her dream of children for good. As in, he's "getting a vasectomy, so deal with it" for good.

The tears come at last, hard and deep sobs that shock her with their intensity. She's crying for more than her job, her failed marriage, her childless belly. She's crying for the promise of a life that no longer exists. Nothing can change what's happened over the past ten years. She can't get a do-over. She is thirty-four years old, her eggs are drying up, and her entire world has just crashed down around her ears. She had it all, and now, in a heartbeat, it's gone.

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When she is spent, when the tears have stopped, and the reality sets in, she changes clothes, careful to get the seams just right on her pants as she folds them—she won't be able to afford to dry-clean them after every wear anymore—and tackles scrubbing the tiny basement kitchen. It's not dirty, but it gives her something to do. Cleaning is meditative.

Within ten minutes, the kitchen is sparkling, and she has no answers. Now what?

Maybe a walk? Drive across the bridge, sneak into her house, and take the dog for a run? Something, anything, to take her away from this shitty morning. No, she can't chance it with Charlie. Theo might be home, and she just cannot face him right now. She'll just go down to the Potomac, trace the canal path. It's a pretty day with a gruesome interior. Maybe some fresh air will help her think.

Thick dark hair back in a ponytail, sneakers on, she is almost out the door when her phone rings. She sees her dad's smiling face on the screen.

She debates answering. He has a way of sensing when things aren't going right for her. She will have a hard time not just spilling all her woes. But she adores her dad, and he doesn't call during the day very often. He teaches at the private school back home, astronomy and physics, and his classes usually overlap her workday. Something could be wrong. She slides open the phone.

"Dad? Is everything okay?"

"Hey, jellybean. Am I speaking to the new director of the NISL lab?"

"Oh. Well. No."

"You didn't get the promotion?"

Oh boy, this is going to be fun. If your idea of fun is total humiliation. "Not exactly. What's going on?"

He is thankfully easily diverted. "Oh, you know, it's a funny story." His voice sounds strange, thick and syrupy. She hears a beep, then another.

"Dad? What is that noise? It sounds like a heart monitor."

"You, my darling jellybean, are too smart for your own good. Here's a little monkey wrench for you. I took a tumble down the front stairs of Old East and broke my femur."

"You did what? Oh my God, Dad. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Well, as fine as I can be while still being embarrassed as heck. It's a beautiful day, the quad was full. Everyone saw. And the ambulance . . ." He clicks his tongue. "Anyway, I'm here at the hospital, and I'm a little stoned, they put something in my IV. The not-great news is it's a compound fracture, so they have to put a rod in to stabilize it. I'm going into surgery within the hour."

That explains the weird note in his voice. She's already turning around and heading back into the depths of the apartment. The universe has quite a sense of humor. "I'm on my

way.” She looks at her watch. Marchburg is a three-hour drive, give or take the traffic. “I’ll be there by dinner.”

“Honey, you don’t have to come home. I just wanted to let you know.”

“Dad, you’re going to need help, and I’m free for a few days. Good job waiting until finals were over. I commend your impeccable timing.”

“But finals aren’t over,” he laments, and she laughs.

“The school will figure it out. You are responsible for feeling better, stat. I’ll see you tonight. I’d say break a leg about the surgery, but . . .”

He gives a hyena giggle that she suspects means whatever pain meds they’ve given him are kicking in.

“Seriously, behave for the doctors, and I’ll be there when you wake up. I love you.”

“I love you more, jellybean. Drive carefully.”

**LAST SEEN is coming August 1, 2025**

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## ABOUT J.T. ELLISON



*photo credit: KidTee Hello Photography*

J.T. Ellison is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of more than 35 novels and the Emmy® award-winning co-host of the literary TV show *A Word on Words*. She also writes urban fantasy under the pen name Joss Walker. With millions of books in print, her work has won critical acclaim, prestigious awards, been optioned for television, and has been published in 30 countries. J.T. lives in Nashville with her husband and twin kittens, one of whom is a ghost, where she is hard at work on her next novel.

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